

Arms Pact and Its Effect on U.S. Security

By **RICHARD BURT**

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WASHINGTON, May 10 — The new strategic arms treaty is the most far-reaching arms control step ever taken by the United States and the Soviet Union, yet a key question in the emerging debate is whether it will enhance American security.

News Analysis The essence of the Administration's case for the new treaty was presented by President Carter last night.

"The treaty will enhance the security of the United States and our allies," he said. "It will restrain the nuclear arms race. It will lessen the likelihood of nuclear war."

But for over a year opponents of the accord have maintained just the opposite. In particular, they express strong doubts over whether the treaty is likely to curb military developments, such as the growth of Soviet missile power, that could upset the stability of the nuclear balance.

Administration officials acknowledge that the new treaty is not the one that Mr. Carter set out to achieve early in 1977 and that it will probably be depicted in the coming Senate debate as moving only a slight distance toward his goal of eventually "eliminating nuclear weapons from the face of the earth."

Advantages Over 1972 Pact

Nevertheless, the officials maintain that the agreement is the best that can be achieved now. They also say the treaty is superior to the first arms agreement of 1972 in the following ways:

¶It encompasses a wider range of weapons. The so-called "interim agreement" on offensive arms in 1972 placed ceilings only on numbers of land and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The new treaty limits heavy bombers as well as ballistic missiles, and it also places special subceilings on rockets equipped with multiple warheads. In addition, in a protocol attached to the treaty, mobile ballistic missiles and long-range, land and sea-launched cruise missiles are banned through 1981.

¶It provides for an equal number of arms for both sides. The most controversial aspect of the 1972 interim accord was that it gave Moscow a 40 percent advantage in numbers of total missiles. The new treaty places the same ceiling of 2,250 on each side's overall strategic arsenal, and identical ceilings are also put on selected items, such as land-based missiles with multiple warheads.

¶It requires a reduction in Soviet forces. Unlike the 1972 accord, which allowed Soviet missile forces to grow substantially, the new ceiling of 2,250 will require Moscow to cut its existing missile and bomber forces by some 10 percent.

¶It takes the first step toward controlling arms modernization. While the 1972 accord permitted deployment of new, more capable systems, the new treaty controls, though in a limited way, modernization of existing forces and restricts deployment of new weapons. For instance, each side will be allowed only one new land-based missile until 1985.

Doubts in the Senate

Despite these advances, the new treaty is much more controversial in the Senate than the 1972 accord. Some skeptics, such as Senator John Glenn, Democrat of Ohio, have raised doubts whether the complex new arrangement can be adequately protected against Soviet cheating. Despite the questions that have surrounded this issue, the White House is convinced it will be able finally to reassure Mr. Glenn and others.

Officials are more concerned about meeting the arguments of another group of critics, who are worried that under the accord the Soviet Union will be able to acquire a "first-strike" capability against the 1,054 land-based strategic missiles of the Air Force.

Although few experts believe that Moscow would actually be tempted to launch a surprise nuclear strike, many critics believe that the growing vulnerability of the land-based missile force would be a highly destabilizing development because it might lead Moscow to adopt a more assertive stance in any confrontation with Washington.

Many Administration officials, including Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, are also concerned about missile vulnerability, but they say it should not be an issue in the treaty debate. They argue that without the new treaty, American missiles would still become vulnerable in the 1980's and that the agreement does nothing to stop the United States from responding to this problem by building a new mobile rocket, known as the MX.

Approval Linked With MX

But having this option under the treaty is not the same as exercising it, and some members of Congress predict that unless Mr. Carter announces his support for the MX soon, he will not be able to win Senate approval for the treaty.

While many arms-control advocates are bitterly opposed to a new mobile missile, the White House seems to be giving weight to the prediction. The Administration position is that the treaty alone cannot guarantee American security and that an increase in spending on strategic forces in coming years would not be inconsistent with Mr. Carter's negotiating goals.

For advocates of arms control, this seems a paradoxical outcome for almost seven years of talks. But Presidential aides believe that the critical question that must be taken into account in assessing the treaty is not whether it ends the Soviet-American nuclear arms race but what the two sides might feel compelled to do in the absence of some limits on their strategic options.

"SALT can't end the arms race," an aide said today. "It can only regulate it."